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*The wife of an alcoholic spe*

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UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

*The following graphic description of some of the inconsistencies in measures taken by alcoholics' wives is part of a larger article submitted by a woman who has first-hand experience with what she is talking about. At her request we are withholding her name to protect the traditional anonymity that is accorded to most first-person statements by alcoholics and those connected with them.*

# *The Wife of An Alcoholic Speaks*

THE early stage alcoholic is usually an employed person with a home and family. At this stage of his illness he still exercises control over his behaviour but, as the illness progresses, his controls become increasingly less effective. More often than not he is above average intelligence and is able to function reasonably well in a community for years without being recognized as a sick person by the casual observer. The picture at home will be a different one.

A drinking problem in the home will often be more easily recognized by the wife's behaviour than by that of the drinker. For example, she will probably:

make excuses for her husband's drinking behaviour;

mother him;

keep up appearances for the rest of the world;

see that he gets his hair cut and is properly dressed;

be sure he is wakened in time to get to work;

be sure to phone his place of employment and tell his employer he is ill if he is unable to make it;

cover up for him to the neighbours;



make every effort to get food into him;  
stay away from people almost entirely or go out  
as often as possible to get away from it all;

do much of the work around the home which is  
usually associated with men;  
work to increase the family income or else  
supply all of it;  
obtain employment for her husband through her  
connections or help him with his work;  
clean up the bed when he vomits or worse;  
complain about it, then do it again;

tell him not to strike or yell at the children;  
strike or yell at the children herself;  
pay his bills for him;  
buy or supply the furniture for him;  
(mothers do a good bit of these latter two);  
control the finances (as much as she can lay her  
hands on);

arrange for the entertainment, if any;  
drink with him so he will not become so  
intoxicated;  
encourage him to drink at home so she can keep  
an eye on him and the rest of the world will not  
know about it;

tell him to get out so she will not have to look  
at him;  
send the children to bring him home;  
phone around to locate him;  
tell him he doesn't love her anymore (he will  
make a similar complaint);

complain about the money he spends on alcohol;  
buy more for him or give him money for it;  
pour it down the sink;  
blame his drinking on his job;  
blame it on his friends or the crowd he works  
with;  
blame it on the army, navy, or air-force;

console him when he feels sorry for himself;  
tell him not to feel so sorry for himself;

use sex as a weapon to control him;  
lie about the amount of money they owe or have  
on hand;  
run up bills so he will not have enough left to  
drink on;

worry over him;  
cry over him;  
scold him;  
beat him;

refuse to sleep with him;  
sleep with him;  
try to reason with him;  
keep on having children by him;  
buy him all kinds of tools or sports equipment  
so he will have something to do besides drink  
(waste of money—he will drink anyway when  
the novelty wears off);  
leave him;  
come back to him;

spend the night in a hotel;  
spend it with the neighbours;  
spend it with him;

threaten to leave for good;  
fail to carry out the threat;

run home to mother;  
scream at him;  
swear at him;  
give him the "silent treatment";  
run to his mother;

tell him to phone if he will not be home, then  
argue or scold when he does;  
encourage him to try controlled drinking so she  
will not have to go without hers;  
wait on him;  
tell him to wait on himself;  
arrange to tie up most of his free time so he  
will not have time to drink;

charge him with assault;  
withdraw the charge;  
keep herself and the home spotless;  
let herself and the house fall apart;  
refuse to take another beating;

encourage him not to drive when he drinks so  
he won't get himself in a jam;  
get him out of the jam;  
cheat on him because he cheated on her;  
hate him;  
hate his mother;  
try to get help for him;  
cook for him;  
tell him to cook for himself because he failed  
to come home to eat what she prepared;

pray he will quit drinking;  
pray he will drink himself to death;  
hope he will break his neck before she does it  
for him;  
and, finally—usually when some crisis in the  
home forces her to do so—she may take the  
critical step of getting her husband out or get-  
ting herself and the children out of the home  
unless he accepts treatment.

I do not say a wife is right or wrong in what  
she does — but I do say this is how a wife will  
react to a drinking problem in the home. Are you  
able to see:

how completely useless it all is and how com-  
pletely ridiculous a wife makes herself look —  
even to herself;



that a wife, *by her own actions* (accepting responsibility for him, covering up for him, mothering him, maintaining a home for him, etc.), is only helping her man to drink;

that she is only helping to prolong the drinking years and the agony that goes with them.

The average alcoholic (said to be about 45 years of age) would not be able to function as long as he does if his wife (or mother) would:

allow him to stand on his own two feet where he properly belongs;

let him accept responsibility for his own actions;

allow him to retain his self-respect instead of slowly helping him to destroy it.

This harmful behaviour on the part of the wife is not intentional. She has just been unable or unwilling to see the damage she is doing. Perhaps she hasn't realized that *there are sources of help for her in the community.*

In larger cities there are Al-Anon groups for family members and friends of alcoholics, personal and marriage counselling services, child guidance centres, family agencies and clinics. In smaller communities it may be a public health nurse or an interested member of the clergy who can help a wife really understand herself and what is happening to her family. In areas where there might not be an Al-Anon group, A.A. members will help.

As a result of wise counselling, many wives have learned to live at peace with themselves and to accept their role as a mother even when the husband continues to drink. Today, alcoholism clinics appreciate the importance of working with wives to help stabilize the home situation. This can be a real factor in the alcoholic's own attitude toward seeking treatment.

If you are the wife of an alcoholic caught up in that milling, frantic period of trial and error, remember — for those who really want it — there is help in the community.

# The Foundation Is Here To Help



The Alcoholism and Drug Addiction Research Foundation was established by the Province of Ontario to study and to assist in relieving alcoholism and other addictions.

The Foundation's Head Offices, Research Division, Communication Programs Division, and a variety of Treatment Services are located in Toronto.

There are also regional program centres and branches located in major centres across the Province of Ontario.

For more information, contact the Foundation centre nearest your home.

*Counselling services are available for members of the alcoholic's family.*

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*The wife of an alcoholic speaks*

WIFE